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To fate, and that eternall memorie
 Of the best death, writ with it, for their cuntry)
 Shall walke at pleasure in the tents of rest,
 And see farre off, beneath him, all their host
 Tormented after life, etc.,

should perhaps be compared with Cicero's Fourteenth Philippic, xii, 31,

O fortunata mors, quae naturae debita pro patria est potissimum reddita! . . . Etenim Mars ipse ex acie fortissimum quemque pignerari solet. Illi igitur impii, quos cecidistis, etiam ad inferos poenas parricidii luent; vos vero, qui extremum spiritum in victoria effudistis, piorum estis sedem et locum consecuti. Brevis a natura vita vobis data est, at memoria bene redditae vitae sempiterna.

W. P. MUSTARD.

The Johns Hopkins University.

CHAUCER AND THE "FOWLE OK"

A robbery *per se* committed five centuries and more ago may not be of much importance; when, however, it concerns the poet Chaucer the matter assumes proportions of interest. The poet, according to the records, was robbed near the "fowle ok" September 3, 1390; and exactly three days later he was robbed twice,—at Westminster, and at Hatcham, Surrey.¹ Whether there were three robberies inside of four days, or whether through blunders in the documents there were but two has never been definitely decided. Mr. Selby² did not attempt, in his exhaustive investigation of the robberies, to identify the Foul Oak incident with either of the other two. Mr. Kirk³ thought that if the accounts are to be taken literally there were three holdups, though elsewhere⁴ he considered Skeat's identification as "probable." Skeat⁵ had remarked that the robbery at "Hatcham, Surrey (now a part of London, approached by the Old Kent Road and not far from Deptford and Greenwich;" was identical with the one near the Foul Oak. Thus,

¹ *Life-Records*, 2nd series (1875), Part I.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 5 ff.

³ *Ibid.* (1900), p. xl; cf. *ibid.*, Part IV, p. 292 note.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xli note.

⁵ *Works*, I, p. xli.

according to Skeat, there were but two robberies—at Westminster and at Hatcham, a view that several writers have held by implication or in express terms: for example, Lounsbury,⁶ Wyatt,⁷ Emerson,⁸ Pollard,⁹ J. W. H[ales],¹⁰ Wells.¹¹ Liddell,¹² on the other hand, assumes but one robbery; MacCracken¹³ says there were two—but both committed “near the Foul Oak in Kent.” Coultton¹⁴ darkens counsel when he writes: the poet “was the victim of at least two, and just possibly three, highway robberies (of which two were on one day) at Westminster, and near ‘The Foul Oak’ at Hatcham.” When to these conflicting accounts are added other contradictory statements—for example the amount of money lost at Hatcham, £9 44d.,¹⁵ is said by Skeat to have been £9 3s. 2d.; by Hales £9 3s. 6d.; and by Pollard £9 3s. 8d.—no apology it is hoped should be necessary for attempting to settle a small point in the life of Chaucer.

In view of the fact that the poet's unfortunate experiences during this first week of September have interested Chaucer scholars for half a century, it seems surprising that an entry in the *Rolls of Parliament*,¹⁶ which seems to clear up the matter, should have been overlooked. Additional interest attaches itself to the story in the *Rolls* in that a business associate of Chaucer—Nicholas Brembre, a prominent Londoner—is concerned.

In 1387 the fatal Parliament charged Brembre with having taken twenty-two prisoners from Newgate, and “les amesnoit hors de Loundr’ en le Counte de Kent a une lieu q est appelle le Foul Oke,” where they were beheaded.

This reference, then, definitely identifies Foul Oak with Kent; moreover it was a place, and not a patriarch of the forest; and obviously it was an isolated community, though apparently not far

⁶ *Life*, I, pp. 84 f.

⁷ *Chaucer* (selections), no date, p. 6.

⁸ *Chaucer: Selected Poems* (1911), p. xvii.

⁹ *Chaucer* (Globe edition), p. xix; *Ency. Brit.*, 11th ed., VI, p. 14.

¹⁰ *Dict. Natl. Biog.*, X, p. 165. He incorrectly gives the 9th of Sept.

¹¹ *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, 1916, p. 615.

¹² *Chaucer* (selections), 1902, p. cxvi.

¹³ *A College Chaucer*, 1913, p. 595.

¹⁴ *Chaucer and his England*, 1908, p. 63.

¹⁵ *Life-Records*, Part I, pp. 19, 30. One entry (p. 19) indeed gives 43d.

¹⁶ III, p. 231.

from London. It would seem therefore that the records may be trusted¹⁷: the poet was held up thrice inside of four days. Judging from the amount of travelling about he did during these first days of September, one concludes that Chaucer's duties as Clerk of the Works were somewhat arduous; at any rate the tasks must have been time—and energy—consumers. The poet's life at this particular period could not have been one of such leisure as is supposed to accompany the poetic muse.¹⁸ Nor is it at all likely that his entire two years (1389-1391) as royal clerk were much less strenuous. All this of course has a bearing on the composition of the *Canterbury Tales*, which were then under way.

E. P. KUHLE.

Goucher College.

¹⁷ Of course the record explicitly states that the holdup was *near* the Foul Oak. Even then, however, it seems impossible to accept the conclusions of Skeat and others,—that the robbery referred to is the one in Surrey (Hatcham). In the first place we must assume the date (September 3) to be incorrect; again, the Foul Oak and Hatcham entries do not agree in the amount of money lost by the poet. Though, to be sure, the Hatcham records vary as to the amount, yet of the three accounts two give £9 44d. (and 43d.) (Part I, pp. 19, 30), and the third £20 6s. 8d. (Part IV, p. 339). Again, it is not certain that the culprits (whether one or two gangs) responsible for the holdups on the 6th, namely at Westminster and Hatcham, were the same persons who held up the poet on the 3rd (cf. Kirk, "Forewords," *Life-Records*, p. xli). Though it may be urged that both at Hatcham and near the Foul Oak the poet lost goods (*moebles*), a horse, and (according to one entry) *nearly* the same amount of money—£20, 6s. 8d. and £20 respectively, which thus suggests but a single holdup, yet a glance at the records of other robberies by the various highwaymen shows that goods and horses were not uncommon booty (cf. Part I, pp. 8, 12 ff.). It should be emphasized that there is no greater difficulty in accepting three than two mishaps, for the highwaymen were particularly active at this time (cf. Part I). Is it significant, finally, that the King was in Kent (at his manor of Eltham) when he pardoned Chaucer of the loss near the Foul Oak (cf. Part IV, p. 292)?

¹⁸ The legal matters pertaining to the robberies occupied the poet's attention off and on for months (cf. Kirk, "Forewords," p. xlii, Part I, pp. 12 ff.).